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Need and Scope of Global Partnership on Public Health Research

Establishing an effective global health research collaboration requires significant organisation and planning. This editorial introduces the launch of our new research collaboration. It highlights the processes and some of the key issues taken into consideration when setting up such a collaboration.

In July 2016, a group of 16 researchers from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Nigeria and the United Kingdom (UK) met at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) to initiate the 'Global Consortium on Public Health Research'. The meeting was funded by LJMU's Public Health Institute.

Structure

A tactical organisational structure is a pre-requisite for an effective collaboration. We settled for a flexible spoke and hub model with LJMU as the hub providing leadership and the individual countries as the spokes. This approach recognises the strength of LJMU as the coordinating hub. Yet it remains flexible whereby in the event of a major activity in any of the collaborating partner countries, that country may coordinate the activity as a leading hub.

Key focus

As a partnership, it is our intention to make a tangible impact upon major public health challenges, whilst strengthening the participating institutions in a sustainable manner. Our collaboration came to a consensus on a number of priority research areas, based on our strengths and collective experience and on our knowledge of the key global issues for the next decade (Table 1).

Table 1 : Key areas of research focus of the consortium

- Reproductive, maternal and child health
- Rural and urban comparisons (Equity and health)
- Nutrition
- Environment and health
- Health systems and health workforce
- Health, lifestyle and substance use
- Non-Communicable Diseases
- Preventable road traffic injuries and safety
- Disability

*Editorial*Short-term vs. long-term goals

The consideration of both short and long term achievable goals is essential for the formulation of aims and objectives. In the short term, we will establish, strengthen and nurture the collaboration by developing a structure and channels of communication between member institutions, initiate modest grant applications and publish academic outputs. In the longer term we will develop a number of substantial joint grant applications, publish high quality scientific papers and facilitate the professional and academic development of staff in the collaborating institutions. However, we are aware of the pros and cons of focusing too much on either short-term goals or long-term ones. The disadvantage of focusing on short-term goals include the dangers that: (a) the first successful grant application could start defining the collaboration, and direct collaborators' efforts; or (b) having repeated short-term success may hinder consideration and investment in longer term research and programme grants. Conversely, focusing too much on the long-term goals could lead to disillusionment among participants (and other stake-holders) due to lack of immediate success and therefore, may direct their attention and energy elsewhere. So, it is a delicate balancing act.

Size matters

One of the key reasons for setting up international collaborations between researchers in low/middle and high-income countries is to be able to apply for larger grants that require such global collaborations. It is vital to ensure that such collaborations are transparent and coherent, i.e. between individuals and institutions working in related academic fields. The collaboration also needs to be manageable. While bringing together a rich mix of academics from different countries with different skills and experiences, one would want to keep the size of the collaboration small enough for people to get to know each other and learn about each other's skills and interests. To maximise the potential of the collaboration, the differences and individual characteristics of each partner should be celebrated and capitalised upon.

Capacity building

This collaboration will put high emphasis on building research capacity in low/middle-income countries. However, we are not oblivious of the fact that we can all learn from each other. Organising short training sessions in low-income countries is one type of such capacity building. We envisage that long-term research capacity building would be through joint-funded PhD programmes or even jointly awarded PhDs.

Final thoughts

Although the collaboration is formally between partner institutions, typically, as in any health endeavour, the key resource is the participating individual. We recognise that it is the researchers whose intellect, enthusiasm, and often in the health field, their passion to make the world a fairer, better place that form the heart of the partnership. The structure and processes of the collaboration are established to harness the commitment, experiences and skills of participants, to support their development and capitalise on synergies to have a positive impact on public health on the global stage.

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